

Title: The (Mal)Practice of Dowry in Contemporary India

Subtitle: A Challenge to Marriage and Family Ministry

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Abstract :

The author explores the (mal) practice of dowry in contemporary India and the challenge it presents to marriage and family ministry. He explains how originally harmless and well-intended dowry customs changed under the influence of historical circumstances that turned them into a business-like family strategy aimed at rising families' social status, wealth and power. This evolution had dramatic consequences for Indian marriage and family life and especially for women. Dowry-related violence and even murder (often disguised as domestic accidents) are not uncommon when the bride's family fails to pay the agreed amount. Despite legal protection (Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961) and multiple efforts of antidowry movements, the dowry system is still very much alive and continues to threaten marriage and the family. Can Christianity play a role in reinterpreting the concept of dowry in a way that favours healthy marriages and families? The author briefly sketches the post-conciliar theology of marriage and family that calls on couples and their families to cooperate and create a domestic church based on covenantal love and mutual respect. This theology should inspire the church to think about what could be done in the pastoral field to dismiss and eradicate the prevalent dowry culture, among others by empowering women, men and the whole society. The author firmly believes that Basic Christian Communities, in collaboration with self-help groups, Kudumba Sree, and other emancipatory movements are capable of challenging the existing dowry system through reinterpreting it in the multi-religious, multiethnic and multi-cultural context of India.